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The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

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Nonconformist religious newspaper

"To promote a free and inquiring
religion through the worship of
God and the celebration of life; the
service of humanity and respect for
all creation; and the upholding of the
liberal Christian tradition."

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Photo by Martyn E Jones

Inquiring Words

Autumn

O Lord, it is time
The summer was so vast
Put your shadows on the sundials
And in the fields let the wind loose.
Order the last fruits to become ripe
Give them two more sunny days
Push them to fulfilment
And force the last sweetness into the heavy wine.
He who has no house now will not build one
He who is alone will be so for a long time to come
Will stay awake, read, write long letters
And restlessly walk in the park among the blown leaves.

— Rainer Maria Rilke

Faith in Words

The annual Christmas issue of worship material, stories and meditations is coming up. Please send in prayers, addresses, meditations, art work, photographs – anything which is an expression of your faith – to *The Inquirer*. We are happy to receive contributions about Christmas, Winter, Solstice – whatever the season means to you. New contributors are most welcome.

For more information or to submit material, email:

Inquirer@btinternet.com Or, use the editor's postal address at left.

Material is due by 15 November

twitter 

Follow **@The_Inquirer** (two underscores) on Twitter. A little shot of Unitarian news and faith in 140 characters. <https://twitter.com/>

Extreme ideology is not Islam

By Cliff Reed

Ignorance regarding religion – and Islam in particular – is a serious problem, especially when it comes to the media. There is a tendency to latch on to particular terms and then use them with no real understanding of what they mean or of their highly nuanced nature. This is particularly the case with the Arabic word ‘jihad’, and its non-Arabic derivative ‘jihadist’.

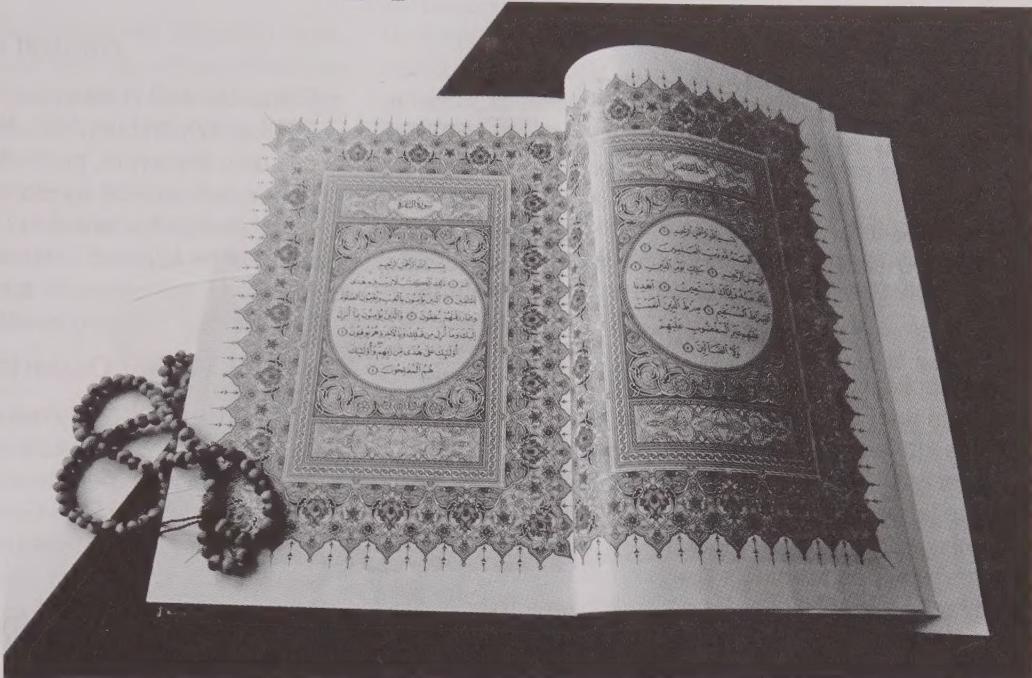
The western media have great difficulty finding a word for people who espouse an extremist and violent ideology in the name of Islam. ‘Islamist’ is one, but many non-Muslims are unaware of the distinction between the terms ‘Islamist’ and Islamic, or between ‘Islamist’ and Muslim. The result is that the extreme ideology of the so-called ‘Islamists’ is often taken to be representative of Islam in general, which it isn’t. Perhaps in an attempt to get away from this problem, the western media have taken to using the term, ‘jihadist’, mistakenly believing that this is a more accurate term for terrorists who claim to be Muslims.

Islam calls for protection of churches

Islam has two major divisions, the Sunni majority and the Shi'a minority. These, in turn, have a number of different sects and schools of thought. All are Muslims, though, and are supposed to respect each other as such. They should also observe the teachings of Islam regarding religious tolerance (albeit conditional) of ‘People of the Book’, the prohibition of compulsion in religion, and the protection of places of worship from violation or attack. Besides mosques, this also includes churches and synagogues, Christians and Jews being ‘People of the Book’. The extremist ideology of the so-called ‘Islamists’ and ‘jihadists’ rejects all this, though, hence their deliberate targeting of both churches and mosques, Christians and Muslims, in recent outrages in Pakistan and Egypt. So how can people calling themselves Muslims perpetrate such barbaric acts of murder, violence, and terror?

The answer probably lies in Wahhabism, a Sunni sect which originated in Arabia in the 18th century and was named after its founder, Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab. They are also

‘The so-called ‘jihadists’ of today, far from being representative of Islam, are likely to be Wahhabists seeing ‘jihad’ in terms of war by any means against anyone they take a dislike to.’



The Quran calls on Muslims to protect the ‘People of the Book’ and their places of worship – quite the opposite of the targeting of churches which has happened in Egypt and Pakistan. Photo by Nahidh Salman

called Muwahhidun (‘Unitarians’) because of their particular emphasis on the Islamic principle of ‘tawhid’, or ‘Divine Unity’. Wahhabism is the form of Islam found in modern Saudi Arabia, although there – of necessity – it has lost, very slightly, some of its original fervour. This is not the case, however, with the Wahhabi ‘purists’ (as they see themselves) of al-Qaeda and its various offshoots and allies across the Muslim world. They look back to al-Wahhab’s narrow and intolerant belief that all those who differed from him were ‘heretics’, ‘apostates’, and ‘infidels’ and therefore legitimate targets of violence, which he called ‘jihad’. This meant that he believed in making war, not only on Christians and Jews, not only on Shi'a Muslims, but on Sunni Muslims too, if they disagreed with him. Apparently, he was responsible for introducing firearms into the tribal and sectarian warfare of Arabia.

Wahhabists adopt violent struggle

The so-called ‘jihadists’ of today, far from being representative of Islam, are likely to be Wahhabists seeing ‘jihad’ in terms of war by any means against anyone they take a dislike to. This is not what jihad actually means, though. A more accurate meaning than the simplistic term ‘holy war’ is ‘holy struggle’, or ‘striving in the way of God’. Jihad can refer to a number of ways in which the believer is involved in a spiritual or physical contest, including an internal one. It is striving to do the will of God, to follow the right path, to carry Islam into places where it is unknown, and to resist injustice. Can it mean ‘holy war’? Yes, it can – but not the slaughter of innocent civilians, regardless of age, faith, or nationality, as in the recent attack in Nairobi. Terrorism cannot be jihad. Jihad as holy war is the defence of the Muslim community, the Ummah, against aggression. Many Muslims may see some recent wars this way, allowing the extremists to present themselves as defenders of the faith, but murder is not jihad, and those who support it, promote it, and commit it should not be called ‘jihadists’.

The Rev Cliff Reed is a retired Unitarian minister.

Executive Committee Key Messages

Executive Committee

13 September 2013 – Key Messages

General Assembly Roll of Ministers and Lay Pastors

The Executive Committee is pleased to add Rev Cody Coyne and Rev Winnie Gordon to the General Assembly Roll of Ministers with probationary status.

Millennium Fund Grants

Two applications were received for grants from the Millennium Fund and it was agreed to award Highland Place Unitarian Church, Aberdare £1500 towards the installation of a new sound and loop system and UKunitarianTV £800 towards computer equipment to mix, edit and create videos. The Millennium Fund helps to support projects that promote – directly or indirectly – spiritual and/or numerical growth within the Unitarian Movement and further information is available from the Chief Officer.

Budget

The General Assembly's Budget for the Year commencing 1 October 2013 was approved. The key points are as follows:

The General Assembly, like many congregations, is facing pressures on spending as well as on income, particularly the need to fund past pension liabilities.

Maintaining current activities and programmes and funding new initiatives, such as the IT system upgrade and a new GA website, has been given priority resulting in a planned deficit of £16,000.

The congregational quota will rise by £2 per quota member to £32 in 2013/14.

Use of various funds held separately – both designated and restricted – were reviewed and will be used to support the work of the Assembly, especially with children and young people.

Work will commence on a plan to address the long-term finances of the General Assembly when financial support from the Bowland Trust ceases in 2025.

Using the New Strapline

The Visibility Strategy Group presented proposals for rolling-out the new General Assembly strapline:

nurturing faith • embracing life • celebrating difference

The strapline will be formally launched at the Annual Meetings, however it will be gradually introduced in publicity materials over the next few months. It is already on the window of the Unitarian Reception of Essex Hall.

Annual Meetings

Plans are well in hand for the Annual Meetings in April 2014 at Whittlebury Hall, Northamptonshire. Efforts to promote the event, particularly the high quality new venue, will include a colour flyer which will shortly be circulated and a leaflet in December with the booking forms. The Midland Unitarian Association was thanked for agreeing to arrange a "Celebrating Our Community" evening event.

Welsh Department Secretary

The Executive Committee offered its thanks and best wishes for the future to Dr Carwyn Tywyn, former Welsh Department Secretary, who left the employment of the General Assembly on 6 September 2013 to take up a position with Home-Start UK.

Strategy Groups

The Executive Committee offered its thanks to Dorothy Haughton, former chair, and to Angela Maher who for personal reasons have resigned from the Visibility Strategy Group and to Kate Buchanan, former co-chair of the Local Leadership Strategy Group, who has stood down having commenced ministry training.

GA needs volunteers

A number of volunteer roles are available and expressions of interest are sought. Please contact the Chief Officer for further information and to register an interest.

Honorary Treasurer

To fulfil the functions of Honorary Treasurer and act as a member of the Executive Committee ('trustee') of the General Assembly.

Opportunities during Annual Meetings

Photographer

Press Officer

Social Media role

Funding Development Group

Two members with experience of charity finance and fund-raising are sought to join the other members; Robert Ince, Louise Rogers and the Chief Officer.

Visibility Strategy Group and Local Leadership Strategy Group

Places are available on the above groups for those with knowledge and skills in the above areas.

If you have the skills to help out, contact Derek McAuley, chief officer of the Unitarian General Assembly at Essex Hall (details on page 2) or email Dmcauley@unitarian.org.uk

Nicholas Teape's writings still relevant

By Frank Walker

June Teape has produced a fascinating and delightful book, most attractively presented, based upon the writings of her late husband the Rev Nicholas Teape, formerly Unitarian minister at Rotherham and Ipswich who died in 1975, suddenly and much too early at the age of 54.

Nick Teape emerged as a Unitarian from an unlikely background: a farming community in the south of Ireland. He grew up in the Anglican and Protestant Church of Ireland where early on the parson saw him as a possible candidate for the church's ministry. This ensured a good grounding in orthodox Christianity, and a strenuous training in how to endure as one of a minority in an overwhelmingly Catholic society.

His family assumed he would carry on farming their ancestral estates. (One of his 16th century ancestors was High Sheriff of Cork). Certainly he inherited a lifelong love of horses, especially the noble Suffolk Punch cart-horses, but as a teenager he realised that he was not cut out for a traditional farming life. He loved to haunt the excellent second-hand bookshops in Cork city, where he found works by Emerson, Tolstoy, the pagan religious humanist Llewellyn Powys, and DH Lawrence. He read voraciously and determined to escape from farming.

After the Second World War he moved to England where he was drafted into work in a psychiatric hospital. He also tried a variety of jobs, including work on building sites and surveying in London, where he discovered the Croydon Unitarian Church during the ministry of the Rev AB Downing. He also met June who was teaching first in Dagenham and then in Notting Hill, living in a series of Rachmanesque bedsits. Nick became a mature student for the ministry at Manchester College, Oxford, and they were married.

Nick was a gifted writer – indeed, I always thought of him as something of a genius. You could rely on him for unconventional and unfashionable views, clearly, pungently and fearlessly expressed. He wrote with grace and humour, hard-hitting, but honourable in his approach to opponents. In Ipswich he started to publish *Unitarian Challenge* with its wide-ranging series of thought-provoking articles.

He is especially good at defending those often scorned by the respectable – motor-cyclists, for example, about whom he writes a very entertaining chapter. Nick rode a powerful Norton. Fearlessly, June used to ride pillion with him right across Europe to the borders of Albania. Nick hoped to investigate the officially atheist lifestyle imposed there under the tyrant Enver Hoxha. Sadly, he was always turned away at the border. Hoxha was one example of the fact that, as Nick saw it, much of the world's trouble comes from leaders who enhance their prestige by making themselves indispensable.

He was not afraid to explore without prejudice the ideas of those (such as Wilhelm Reich the psychoanalyst) who were usually dismissed as cranks. He was willing to give oddities a fair hearing. He writes with knowledge and authority about

the condition of Ireland, regretting the division of the country. He believed that the inclusion of the Ulster Protestants in a united Ireland would have had a transforming and beneficial influence, and that the murderous history of Ireland in the 20th and 21st centuries could have been avoided.

He was a religious humanist, profoundly versed in the Christian tradition as his accounts of *Easter* and *From Calvary to Empty Tomb* vividly demonstrate. He knew that life is not reducible to plain matter-of-fact statements. We need poetry and symbolism. He is well aware that in the search for truth we come up against paradox and contradiction. In his profound reflections upon the Easter story he uses the example of the Irish martyr Padraig Pearse to show we may be called to act in the

most intractable circumstances, to be God's fools in almost hopeless situations. His own humanism is not a repudiation of God (though he knows that many conceptions of God are utterly mistaken) but an awareness of God not as an entity or an abstraction or quality apart from the world or life. God is found

implicit in the glory of life, and it is our response to this glory that is at the heart of all genuine worship.

The function of religion is to stand for certain values which are not and cannot be the values of the society in which we find ourselves. Society's frame of reference is money, power, prestige and status. Religion's is a life-centred frame of reference. Our society needs to be challenged by an institution which is both conservative and revolutionary. This is the role of the Church.

Nick Teape's writing still reads as freshly as the day it was written. It is in no way out of date. His reflections on the hypocrisy shown in the Profumo scandal, for example, are as relevant now as in the 1960s. In *Religion Without Morals* he writes: "What Christians and Humanists have yet to learn is that morality is not enforced at all. It does not depend on external sanctions. It does not even depend on conscience as a whip or reason as a straitjacket. It is spontaneous. It depends upon something which ultimately defies church and state and public opinion and closed logical systems, and that is the love which springs from the basic instincts of life itself."

In a fascinating parable, *The Mirror*, he writes: "Christ is for many people a mirror, a mirror of God. So they begin to seek Christ, forgetful that a mirror is a place for *seeing* and not for *seeking* ... If Christ gives illumination and meaning to your life, it is life you should seek ..."

You do not have to agree with him, but on every topic he touches he has something interesting, illuminating and provocative to offer. June Teape has produced a lovely book, full of delightful pictures – Nick was strikingly handsome – and she is most generously offering it as a free gift to all who are interested. Send a stamped, addressed envelope to the value of £1.60 to: June Teape, 395 High Street, Walton, Felixstowe, Suffolk IP11 9QR. You will not be disappointed!

The Rev Frank Walker is a retired Unitarian minister.



The Rev Nick Teape welcoming the Mayor of Ipswich, Mrs C Green, and her husband, to a special tercentenary service at the Unitarian Meeting House in May 1962.

Lord's Prayer: Forgiveness opens

By Ashley Hills

An increasing number of Unitarian congregations, it seems, are discontinuing the custom of repeating the Prayer of Jesus – the Lord's Prayer – at their services. The thinking behind the Prayer, it is said, is becoming entirely out of date. The opening words: 'Our Father, who art in heaven ...' give a word picture of God as one dwelling in heaven – above the bright blue sky – and possessing the attributes of a father – a caring father – as we understand the term.

The reality, in this harsh and indifferent world, seems quite different and many, nowadays, think of God – whoever and whatever – quite differently from that of a father. And so the Prayer of Jesus is discontinued along with the belief that anything thus repeated could be done so parrot-fashion and without due thought to the words repeated.

And so the prayer is discontinued. However, might there not be a danger in 'throwing out the baby with the bathwater'? The Prayer does remind us of the need for daily bread – for ourselves and all people everywhere; of the need to avoid temptation; of a kingdom not of this world and of the need to be forgiven even as we ourselves forgive others.

Is forgiveness always possible?

Humankind stands in need of mutual forgiveness today. At the end of the day, we each need to work out the issues for ourselves according to our need to forgive or to be forgiven, and so I continue with a question: is it possible to forgive some of the vast atrocities that we hear of, for example, through the media today? Or, again, is it possible to forgive someone who has done us personally a great wrong? Those to whom the wrong has been done, and they alone, will know the answer to such a question. The parents of Joanna Yates whose daughter's tragic end was national news not long ago commented after her killer was convicted of her murder in October 2011:

'The best that we can hope for him is that he spends the rest of his life incarcerated, where his life is a living hell, being the recipient of all the evils, deprivations and degradations that his situation can provide.'

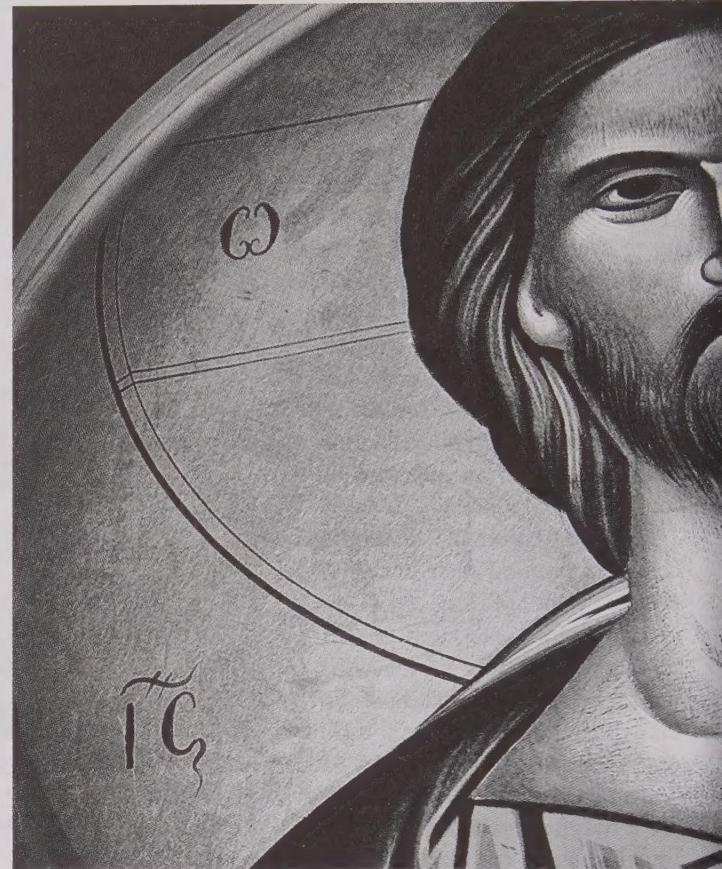
Each one will act according to their conscience. But it is pointed out that Jesus himself fulfilled the dictate of the prayer when, undergoing the agony of crucifixion, he prayed for the forgiveness of those who drove in the nails. Are we ever called upon to forgive injuries so grotesque as these? God forbid, but how might we respond if we were? And what of ourselves when we believe we are in need of forgiveness?

Luther embraced the power of forgiveness

It may be that on that deep, spiritual – indeed religious – level we could feel in need of forgiveness. There was a time in the earlier life of Martin Luther, of the Protestant Reformation fame, that he was in despair and physically unwell because fears and spiritual anxieties weighed upon him. An old monk entered his cell in the Erfurt Monastery and spoke kindly to him. The old man hadn't much knowledge, but he knew his faith and repeated the words: '... I believe in the forgiveness of sins ...' and he went on:

'Dear Martin, you must not only believe in the forgiveness of Peter's sins, and David's sins but you must also trust that your own sins are forgiven ...'

From that moment, his biographer tells us, Luther found peace. Joy filled his heart and he became the vigorous advocate



of the Reformation, and to him, and to his forgiveness, we remain indebted to this day. But what is forgiveness? How does it work? What are the mechanics? In the United States of America in 1830 a certain George Wilson was to be hanged for murder and robbery. The president at that time, one Andrew Jackson, gave Wilson a pardon which the condemned man actually refused. Out of this unique situation the Chief Justice, John Marshall, drew up the following statement:

'A pardon is a piece of paper, the value of which depends upon its acceptance by the person implicated. It is hardly to be supposed than one under the sentence of death would refuse to accept a pardon. But if it is refused it is no longer a pardon. George Wilson must hang.'

And George Wilson did hang. And on that deep spiritual level, when we repeat those words: '... forgive us ... as we forgive ...' let us grasp that forgiveness, joyfully letting it echo in our lives and deeds.

Human forgiveness confirms God's existence

Thus as we are forgiven so we forgive. Johan Bojer, a Norwegian writer in his story *The Great Hunger*, tells of a man who grasped the truth that forgiveness opens up a completely new dimension in life. He was an engineer who suffered a breakdown through overwork and to recover he went down into the country. There, his small child was mauled to death by the savage dog of a heartless neighbour, and his heart was broken again. Life, it seemed, had turned utterly against him and blocked off any glimmer of happiness. In his mental agony he sought a way of coming to terms with life and he discovered it in an act of forgiveness. A famine had set in, and his neighbour had no corn to sow for next year's harvest, so the engineer went out and sowed seed in the man's field

completely new dimension in life

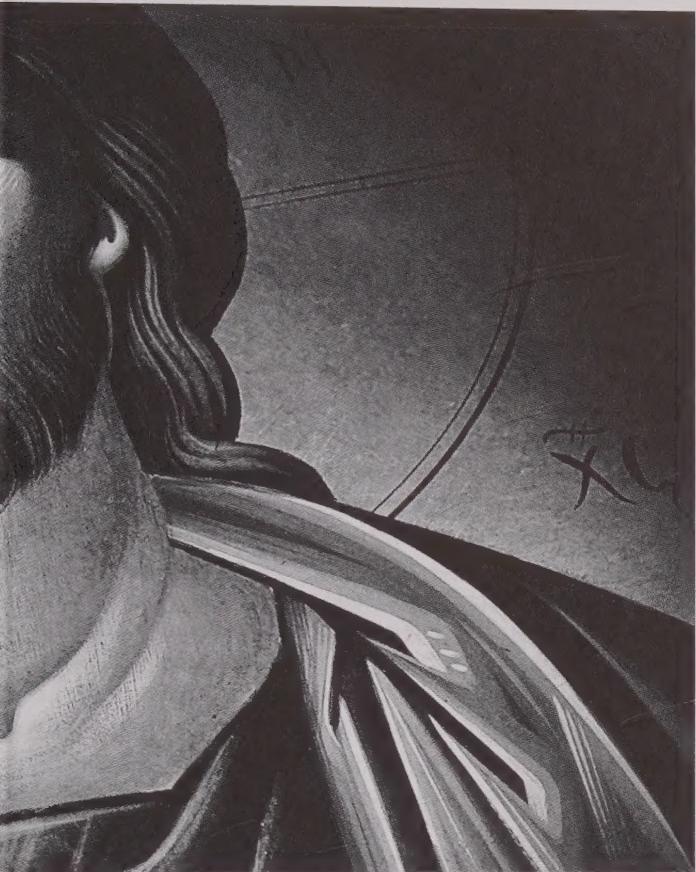


Photo by Dimitri Castrique

explaining this odd deed by saying: 'I went and sowed seed in my enemy's field that God might exist'.

No, he was not seeking to make it possible for God to exist in the ultimate sense, but he was seeking to open up a channel through which an act of forgiveness might allow a Higher Love to pierce through, into his broken, loveless world and heal it. And so it did! A little-known poet, GR Woodward, expressed that truth like this:

'When injured, O my soul, thou must Inscribe thy wrongs upon the dust. Forgive, forget: or, staff in hand, Go pen thy sorrows on the sand, Where shall the rising tide efface Of any human grievance trace.'

A handshake offered to killers

When the late Erskine Childers – he died in 1974 – was president of the Republic of Ireland, he recalled how, as a boy of 16, he visited his father in jail the evening before he was to be shot the following dawn. He was put to death by those he loved on the very soil he treasured. In the complexities of Irish history his was the crime of treason: he had held secret talks with the British Government. Before leaving the prison his father asked his son to promise that he would shake hands with each man who had signed the death warrant. His son – the 16-year-old boy – said that he would and thus his father said that he felt able to die in peace.

And still in Ireland, but this time in the North, there was, during the Troubles, a little woman who lived alone in the middle of what was called the peace-line area of Belfast, where most nights there was fighting and fear. There was a day when the Minister of Community Relations, in the then-Stormont Government, visited that locality and spoke to this woman who told him: 'I'll tell you what I do for Northern Ireland. Every

time I see a soldier from England killed, I try to write to his mother or widow. This is my secret contribution for Ulster.' She showed him some of the letters she had received back, and this is one she had from a young woman in the Wirral in Cheshire, an ordinary working-class girl, and this is what she said: 'Thank you very much for your comforting letter. I felt so bitter toward Irish people when those wicked terrorists took my darling Arthur from me. Every time the phone rings I think it's him telling me it's all been a terrible mistake. But when I received your letter my heart felt so ashamed.

'My husband was never afraid of going to Ulster because he said he was there to help and protect all those who wanted peace.'

'Thank you so much for the postal order for my young daughter. I'll buy her something that will remind me of you because I picture you as a saint. My husband would have been coming home to us one week from today. I shall miss him terribly, but I'm praying for the forgiveness of us all. Thank you again. God bless you, love Patricia.'

That is forgiveness.

Forgive us as we forgive

That is what the Prayer of Jesus seeks to achieve through those words: '... forgive us ... as we forgive'. What hopes, what possibilities, what transformations, what miracles lie within these very words? Heaven forbid that we should simply allow them to roll off our tongues without realising their potential.

In John Masefield's 'The Everlasting Mercy', Saul Kane¹ describes his feelings after he has been forgiven. This extract demonstrates the power – if we need any demonstration – of a religious faith upon the daily life and experience of men and women:

Saul Kane says:

O the glory of a lighted mind,
How dead I'd been, how dumb, how blind.
The station brook to my new eyes,
Was babbling out of paradise;
The waters rushing from the rain
Were singing, 'Christ has risen again'.
I thought all earthly creatures knelt
From rapture of the joy I felt.
The narrow station wall's brick ledge,
The wild hop withering in the hedge,
The lights in huntsman's upper story,
Were part of an eternal glory,
Were God's eternal garden flowers.
I stood in bliss of this for hours.

Who knows, Saul Kane had felt the impact of those words: '... and forgive us our trespass as we forgive them that trespass against us'.

So may we all.

Ashley Hills is a retired Unitarian minister.

(Endnote)

1 In *The Everlasting Mercy*, the main character Saul Kane (I leave it to you to consider the implications of the name) begins as a liar, cheat, and drunken carouser, albeit not without saving grace. He goes through a series of encounters that bring that grace to the fore and lead him to an overpowering love for nature, the creation and mankind. From the introduction to 'The Everlasting Mercy' by Arthur Kay from 'Poets' Corner' at <http://bit.ly/1eKJEmb>

Vive la différence! France is funny too

I've never lived in a Communist country. I've spent short periods in countries that had recently emerged from under Communist domination, and listened to horror stories from fellow Unitarians. They told of deprivations they suffered, as well as the appalling damage to trust, even among family and friends. A recent holiday in La Bastide sur L'Hers in the south of France, however, brought a stay in a small town with a Communist mayor.

Former Lay Pastor at Framlingham Unitarian Chapel, Ray Seal and his wife (my niece) Sheila have a holiday home there and described some of the benefits of this Communist regime. Facilities such as the bathing pool and use of the town's function room for your family events are free of charge.

The church tower has public address speakers on it, to broadcast news items from the mayor's office, preceded by a 'bing-bong' chime to draw attention. For a moment this reminded me of propaganda broadcasts from Big Brother (the original, George Orwell 1984 nightmare version, not the travesty of it that is the so-called reality TV programme).

These French announcements, however, are of little use if you live out of earshot at the other end of the high street, and the one I heard was simply telling that Monsieur Blanc the farmer was in the market place today, selling his home grown vegetables.

Sheila and Ray have made some alterations to their house there, including the removal of an unwanted front porch. This revealed that the house had no number on it, so they inquired of a neighbour where they might get one. 'Ask at the mayor's office,' came the reply which seemed to be the answer to most questions.

The woman at the mayor's office looked bewildered. 'You have no number on your house?'

'That's right,' said Ray.

'What is the number?'

'Seven.'

'A moment.' She disappeared backstage and there was the sound of bumping and scuffling. She reappeared with a nice, blue and white, ceramic number 7.

'Thank you,' said Ray, and waited for her to produce a bill.

'Oh, no charge,' she said.

Monolithic, tyrannical, domination in the People's Republic of Soviet Socialist La Bastide sur L'Hers? I don't think so. More like Trumpton.

Nearby, next to the *boules* park, stands the town's war memorial, including one woman's name. A *Résistance* fighter I expect. I can't ever recall seeing a woman's name on a war memorial in Britain.

Religion in France is puzzling. It is, at one and the same time, a Catholic country and a secular state. Conflict between the principles of secular statehood and religious freedom has arisen over the ban on the wearing of facial scarves by Muslim girls in state schools.

The ban is implemented, though convictions are frequently overturned on appeal. The ban on *full* facial covering anywhere in public, however, is enforced. This might suggest an intolerant attitude towards organised religion, but other things suggest the opposite. La Bastide sur L'Hers has both a Catholic Church

Funny Old World EN FRANCE



By
John Midgley

and a Protestant Church offering the French version of the Alpha Course. On Sunday the TV channel *France 2* offered us a full morning of '*Emissions Religieuses*', consisting of: 15 minutes of Buddhist meditation, 30 minutes of Islamic teaching, 15 minutes of Judaism, 30 minutes of Orthodox Christianity, 30 minutes each of 'Protestant Presence' and 'The Day of the Lord', and ended with 1 hour 20 minutes of Catholic mass. No sign of Unitarianism, though I should mention that there is a Paris Unitarian Fellowship. It meets for worship monthly in *La Maison Verte*, a Protestant parish and neighbourhood community centre, and consists mainly of expatriate Americans. All welcome, I expect, including Muslims and Communists.

We observed an oddity as we strolled around another small town square. A symbolic statue of *The Republic* has the traditional inscription, *Liberté, Egalité...* but oh dear, *Fraternité* had been chiselled off. A French feminist protest, perhaps, 'Brotherhood' no longer taken as including women? But what word would do instead? *Communauté* perhaps? Or does that sound too much like Communism, or the EC?

We also became aware of the grim religious history of this part of the Midi-Pyrenees, widely referred to as Cathar country. The Cathars were a puritan heretical sect that flourished in the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries. Their history is difficult, and complicated by the fact that most of their literature was deliberately destroyed, but there are signs that some of them were at least influenced by Arianism, though not Unitarianism, of course. They regarded Jesus as human, but more specifically an angel in human form. Mainly they were dualists, believing that the earth came into existence not from one divinity but two, the spiritual part being God, the material part, the Devil.

They were severely oppressed by the Catholic Church, eventually retreating to mountain fortresses until enticed out then treacherously slaughtered. We climbed up to visit one such retreat, Montségur, perched on a mountaintop with stunning views across the Pyrenees to the Mediterranean in the distance. This period of history is now undergoing revision, with Catholics and others regretting the terrible treatment of these victims of bigotry long ago. One memorial had a bunch of fresh roses laid on it, placed by 'students of Cathar history'. We can't change the past, but we can learn from it and express regret for errors. As for the dualists' belief that the world has both good and evil spiritual dimensions, in my pessimistic moments I sometimes think they have a point.

The Rev John Midgley is a retired Unitarian minister.

Imperfectionism brings us closer

There is a beautiful story by Shel Silverstein called the 'Missing Piece'. In the story is an almost perfect circle that feels incomplete and thus goes on a search to find the piece that will complete it. Eventually it finds its 'missing piece', but it does not feel happy or fulfilled at all. It moves so fast that it can no longer appreciate all the life around it and it can no longer sing its little song. So it lays down the piece that completes it and once again sets off on its journey singing its little song. It's a fear that haunts so many of us; it's certainly taken its toll on me over the years. This is the fear of criticism. It can squeeze the life out of us and stop us doing whatever it may be that we want and need to do in life. I have often been held back myself – less so today – but it still lingers. It's part of being human, I suppose. I was talking with a friend recently who had driven herself almost insane in her attempts to prepare perfectly for her new job. She was terrified that she would not be able to do it. I met with her the night before. I could see she was shaking with anxiety. We began to talk and as we talked the anxiety began to settle down as we shared experiences. By the time she left me she was feeling much better. She had an early night and a good night's sleep and began the new job the next day.

The conversation brought similar experiences in my life to mind. A friend recently reminded me that I vowed I would never drive. Truth be told, I only actually learnt because I had to. Now I can come up with a thousand and one reasons why I never learned. But the truth is I was terrified. I never thought I would have the right kind of co-ordination. Not true, it turned out; I got there in the end. It was a hard slog, a painful slog, but I got there in the end.

I remember when I was learning, I drove myself almost mad with anxiety as I got ready to begin my lesson. Each week I tried a different pair of shoes or trainers, the ones that would give the best feel on the clutch. After about 10 weeks I reckon I stumbled on the perfect ones. On reflection, I had probably just learned about clutch control by this time. Each week I would spend an hour in prayer and meditation trying to get over the anxiety, which never really subsided. The only real cure was walking in the park and connecting to life. After about twenty weeks, the fear seemed to subside, as I found I could actually handle the car. I did eventually pass my test and have been driving for more than three years now. I'm never going to be the Formula 1 great Sebastian Vettel, but I can drive. I stuck at what I needed to do; I found the courage to keep on going, despite my fear and error strewn early days. The biggest difference about my life today, compared to the first 30-some years is that I have faith and courage. I have found that something which sustains and holds me and guides me despite my doubt and fear. I can practise imperfection, incompleteness these days. There is far less fear of the criticism of others. I have learnt to practise

From Nothing to Everything

by
Danny Crosby

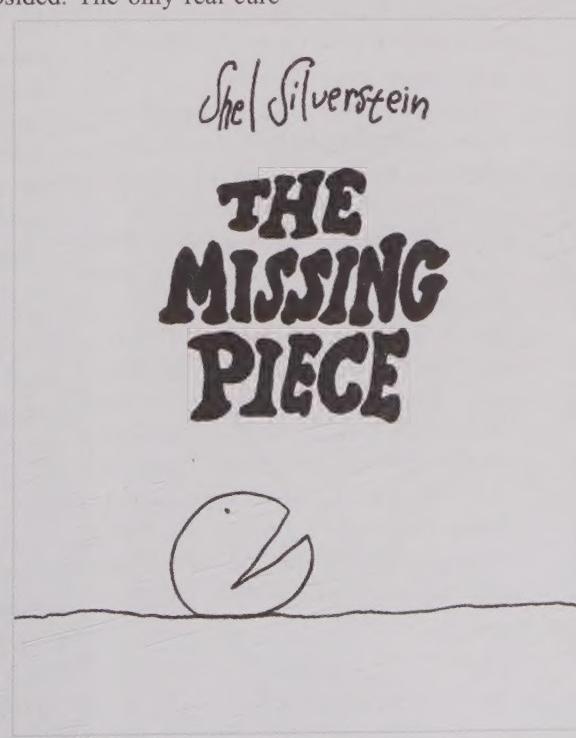


imperfection. I have learnt to do what I can, however falteringly. I am ruled far less today by the perceived criticism of others. I have learnt that it is OK to be imperfect; in fact I would suggest that it is rather lovely. It makes us fully human. No aspect of life is perfect.

I do wonder where this drive, this need to be perfect, to escape our humanity, comes from. Maybe that is exactly where it does, in fact, come from? It is an aspect of that drive to somehow transcend our humanity. I am reminded here of the text from Genesis 1. When God looks at his creation he does not suggest that is perfect, he sees that it is good. Some translations suggest that it means 'fit for purpose'. This fascinates me. I believe that it suggests perfection is not part of natural life and yet we so often cripple ourselves in our attempts to strive for it, to prove ourselves worthy of life. We forget that to be imperfect is to be incomplete and that there is nothing wrong in this, it is to be fully human. To be incomplete simply means we have not yet created the perfect circle and thus we can roll through life singing and enjoying all that is life, with all that is life. We can journey together in love. In our perfect imperfection.

I believe that by practising imperfection we can bring ourselves closer to one another and encourage one another to be all that we can be. *Imperfectionism* gives us the courage to be all that we can be. If we can learn to celebrate imperfection within ourselves, then we can learn to celebrate it in one another. It will bring us closer to one another and we can begin to encourage one another to be all that we can be. We can then work together to build a better life for us all. I believe that perfectionism is a manifestation of selfishness. It's all about the individual. Whereas imperfectionism draws us out of ourselves and nudges us to encourage one another to be whatever we can. You never know, we may end up doing more than we ever dreamed was possible – for the good of ourselves and the good of all.

The Rev Danny Crosby is minister at Altrincham and Urmston. An animation of 'The Missing Piece' by Shel Silverstein can be viewed online here: <http://bit.ly/pskTse>



Letters to the Editor

'Compassion' from a comfortable distance

We should be grateful to the Rev Maud Robinson for drawing our attention to the plight of paedophiles. They and addicts – especially drug addicts – are the lepers of our culture for whom there is neither pity nor respect. Personally I have been active in many ways in both alcohol and gambling, as a research psychologist, as a lecturer, as a trainer of counsellors and psychotherapists, at the coal-face with clients as a counsellor and in charity management where I have chaired the board of the Glasgow Council on Alcohol for a few decades. And I note with pleasure and pride that some churches are involved in the support of destitute refugees, a group who can mostly preserve their dignity and command respect in ways that those lepers at the very bottom of the social and moral pile are unable to do.

True, there are risks in compassionate action with both groups, risks perhaps to children in the one case and to health from used needle injuries in the other but a haze of 'love' and 'spirituality' from a safe and cosy middle-class distance without active involvement may point to a kind of spiritual pride and selfishness that ill becomes any form of spiritual leadership. The Quakers are already involved. Are any of us?

Iain Brown

Glasgow

Jimmy Savile and

Cyril Smith

Whenever Jimmy Savile appeared on TV I switched him off. I was never an admirer. He was known to be a practising Roman Catholic. His church teaches the highest standards of morality. Its clergy and laity join together in tireless work for the relief of human suffering, something wonderfully encouraging and inspiring.

Savile himself became part of this great tradition, raising large sums for charities that help the sick and disabled. He also used his hospital visits for the ruthless sexual exploitation of vulnerable young people: wickedness which must be utterly condemned.

Was his hospital work simply a cynical smokescreen to cover up his criminal activities? Was his adherence to the

church a complete sham? I don't know. I can't be sure. As a 'celebrity' he could have boosted his popularity by other means – by publicising football teams for instance – but significantly he chose hospital work.

I never knew Cyril Smith, but I found his talks at our GA meetings entertaining. He conveyed a jovial and attractive personality, and we admired his public-spirited work in local and national government. His autobiography was, to me, heart-warming, the story of his overcoming poverty and disability to make himself a successful businessman and effective town councillor. The Unitarian Christianity he espoused, however 'old-fashioned', teaches the highest moral standards and has inspired many to an unselfish devotion to public service. It may be true that a certain vanity and self-seeking are involved in all this but such personal vanity need not exclude an entirely genuine concern for the public good.

At the same time, if the allegations against him are true, he pursued a dark secret life that involved the heartless exploitation of vulnerable young people. Most disturbing is the fact that those in positions of responsibility connived at his and Savile's criminal deeds simply because they were 'celebrities'. If Smith committed these acts, does this prove that his religion was a complete sham? That his devotion to the welfare of his constituents was a cynical smokescreen to cover up his crimes? I don't know. I can't be sure.

For various reasons, Savile's celebrity status made it possible for him to give uncontrolled expression to his deviant sexual urges in ways that went completely against the teachings of his religion. It appears that may also have been true of Smith.

Did they struggle to reform, but all to no avail? Were they utter frauds with not one iota of genuine devotion to the faith which they outwardly professed? Were they complete cynics? I don't like to think so, but I can't be sure. I don't know. Certainly humans are the most imperfect and self-contradictory of species, and all stand in need of forgiveness.

Frank Walker

Haslingfield, Cambridge

Heritage Open Days

'Foxes and Leaches' at York

The Unitarian Chapel in St Saviourgate, York, built following the 1689 Toleration Act and registered for 'the worship of God by Protestant Dissenters', was open to the public for Heritage Weekend. Dee Boop and the Chapel's 'Living History' group former local residents had prepared a display of photographs, and other mementoes relating to the locality. The group hosted a memento-gathering on the Sunday afternoon.

The well-attended Sunday morning worship was conducted by Yorkshire's own Bill Darlison, this year's president of the Unitarian General Assembly who spoke about "Possibilianism".

Also on the Sunday afternoon, Andrew Hill led a walk over and around chapels monuments which he called 'Foxes and Leaches and other creatures which haunt this place'. He identified memorials to a young traveller from Dob Lane Chapel, Failsworth who just happened to die in York, to a woman divorced from her husband in 1785 by Act of Parliament, to an 'eminently useful member' of the congregation as well as those to former ministers and other worthies.

– Margaret H

New exhibit at Mansfield

Members of the congregation at Mansfield Old Meeting House ran a range of events over Heritage Open Days. The oldest non-conformist place of worship in Nottinghamshire was open for viewing, with explanatory notices in place and display cases exhibiting 1790s prayer books, Christening Robe that has been worn seven babies at the Meeting House, and the early 19th-century writing set used in signing registers and certificates.

The chapel school rooms hosted an exhibition of artwork by a local U group and display boards showing social events, community and charity work at the Meeting House and the life of the congregation over the last 300 plus years. Chapel secretary Neil Fisher gave a talk on the history of the Old Meeting House on Saturday morning that was attended by 50 people and over 30 people attended a talk by Rev Derek Smith on Sunday afternoon on the events leading up to the founding of the congregation and building of the Meeting House. Several hundred people attended events over the three days.

– Paul F



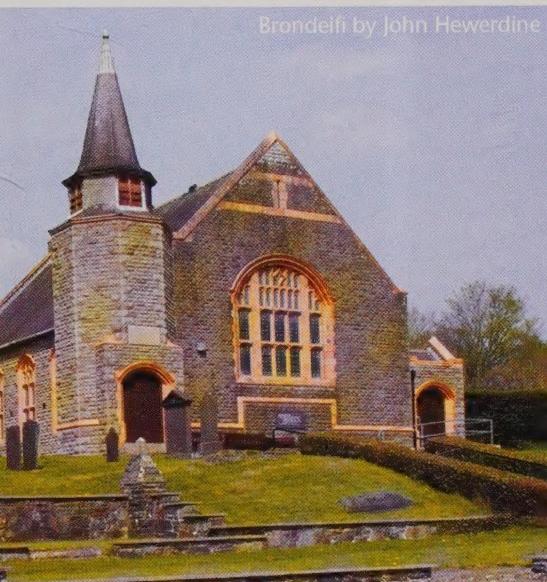
Unitarian congregations across the country celebrated Heritage Open Days in September. These are some of the photos sent into *The Inquirer*. Clockwise from the top left: Following his talk on the history of Mansfield Old Meeting House, Neil Fisher greeted some visitors: photo by Zoe Bremer. At Mansfield, there was also a new exhibition of historical items: photo submitted by Paul Frost. (below) Underbank Chapel, Sheffield held a 'Heritage Days Lunch' for congregation members and friends. And, a model of the chapel was displayed inside: photos submitted by Julian Shaw. At York, the Rev Andrew Hill (right) leads visitors on a tour of chapel monuments: photo by Margaret Hill.



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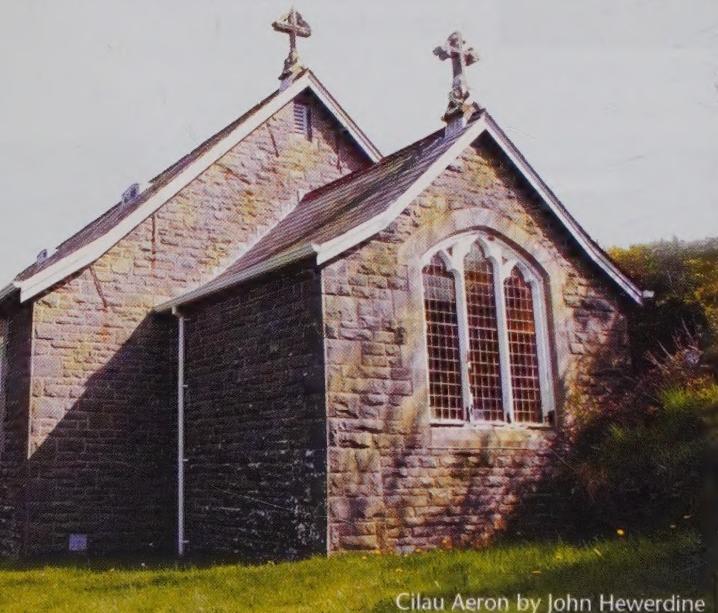


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